# American English Phonological Features on Singapore Radio

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## Abstract

This study seeks to examine how the Americanization of the phonology of Singapore English (SgE), which has conventionally been described as a non-rhotic variety, is manifested by presenters of talk radio programs in Singapore. An auditory analysis of recordings of radio programs on two stations and their six presenters was conducted. The study found that semi-rhotic radio presenters used American phonological features, such as rhoticity, in situations that required a high degree of accuracy. This shows that the prestige model of SgE is shifting from the traditional Received Pronunciation (RP) based model toward a more General American (GA) oriented one, and that American-influenced features are no longer considered undesirable or sloppy. The study also found, on the other hand, that radio presenters utilized RP-like non-rhoticity in situations that required a high degree of formality. This shows that non-rhoticity still retains its traditional prestige.

Keywords: Americanization, phonology, Singapore English, rhoticity

Global spread of English and its implications have attracted attention of many scholars and a large amount of research has been conducted on this topic. Since the Quirk-Kachru controversy, in which the former argued that there should only be one standardized model of English for all non-native learners, whereas the latter held that there were many varieties of English with linguistic equality, three main schools of thought have been considered mainstream in conceptualizing the current state and predicting the future course of English (Seidlhofer, 2003). The first one is that of the Kachruvian paradigm of World Englishes (WE). According to this school, the sociolinguistic reality surrounding English is that of pluricentricity, where many new and legitimate varieties of English have developed or are developing (Kachru, 2005). The second one is that of Crystal, a disciple of Quirk. Crystal (2003) predicted that future citizens of the globalized world will be bilingual in their respective localized varieties of English as well as in what he termed World Standard Spoken English (WSSE). According to Crystal, this WSSE will be largely based on American English (AmE). The third school of thought is that of the proponents of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

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paradigm, an offshoot of WE, including Jenkins (2000) and Seidlhofer (2005). According to ELF scholars, the main use of English in the world today is that among non-native speakers of the language; and its development is no longer dependent on how native speakers of English use it.

Looking at the current situation in Southeast Asia, two trends are readily observable. The first is that of further Englishization, particularly in the sectors of tertiary and secondary education (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, & Walkinshaw, 2017). As universities increasingly switch to English-medium instruction, more and more private high schools, in expanding-circle countries including Indonesia and Cambodia, are turning to semi or full English medium. The second is the partial Americanization of those Asian varieties of English that have traditionally been seen as based on British English due to their colonial experiences in the past. There have been some studies, for instance, on American phonological features observed among students in Hong Kong (Hansen Edwards, 2016), Singapore (Tan, 2011) and Brunei (Redzwan, 2016).

This study, then, seeks to examine how the Americanization of the phonology of Singapore English (SgE), which has conventionally been considered a non-rhotic variety, is manifested by presenters of talk radio programs in Singapore (Tan, 2016; 2011). SgE has traditionally been described a non-rhotic variety, owing to Singapore's colonial experience under the British (Low & Brown, 2005). However, even in the past, it was not uncommon to hear rhoticity and other features of AmE on commercial FM radio broadcasts and advertisements, even though it was rarely heard in everyday conversations among Singaporeans (Tan & Gupta 1992). Low and Brown (2005) pointed out that Singaporeans with rhotic accents could be seen as "putting on airs". Ohara (2005) cited letters to the editor in a local newspaper complaining about "undesirable" influences of American English phonology seeping into Singapore, "contaminating" the purity of English there. However, more recently, Tan (2012) found that rhoticity indeed could be observed in SgE, and that it was more closely associated with highly-educated Singaporeans. She also discovered that rhoticity was seen as more accurate and prestigious. This is remarkable given that Received Pronunciation (RP), the variety on which the norm in Singapore is based, is non-rhotic. Indeed, Ohara (2005) reported that AmE pronunciation features are rarely heard in formal programs in Singapore media, such as news broadcasts. However, an impressionistic observation in Singapore today does indicate sporadic infiltration of rhoticity even in formal registers. For example, in a subway line, "Somerset" station is announced with a rhotic pronunciation, while the same voice-over artist announces "Orchard" station with a non-rhotic pronunciation. Therefore, this study looks into whether rhoticity is appearing in the speech of Singaporean radio personalities, and if so, in what contexts it is more likely to appear. Aside from rhoticity, it also asks whether other features of American English phonology, namely flapping of /t/ before an unstressed syllable in words such as *better* and the short o pronounced as an unrounded open back vowel /ɑ/ in LOT lexical set, are also making their way into SgE.

## Literature Review

The Americanization of SgE, whose phonology has conventionally been seen as RP-based, has attracted scholastic attention for quite some time. The discussion on the causes of the American-influenced phonological features of SgE, however, has been inconclusive. The concrete features that are thought to be of American origin include rhoticity, flapping of /t/ and the unrounding of the short o in the LOT word set. How those features were manifested in my recordings of radio programs will be discussed in the findings and discussion session.

### Spread of American English

English is widely used as an official second language in many countries around the world mainly because of the past influence of the British Empire. This is the reason why, in most outer-circle countries, the prestige form or the target model in school education is based on, if not identical to, a British variety and RP. Starting from the 1980s, proponents of WE spearheaded by Braj Kachru emphasized the pluricentricity of English, and in some countries, legitimacy of local national varieties of English became increasingly recognized. However, as the further spread of globalization and neoliberalism continued into the early 21st century, the importance of nation states has become less significant, and English started to be valued more as a global lingua franca than a symbol of national identity (Wright, 2016). It was therefore inevitable that those Englishes came under increasing influence of AmE, because, by then, the United States (US) was the sole existing global superpower and exporting sizable amount of cultural contents.

In terms of written English, a group of Spanish researchers studied online use of English across the world (Gonçalves, Loureiro-Porto, Ramasco, & Sánchez, 2018). They found that American usages among internet users were prevalent all over the world except in the United Kingdom (UK) itself, and even there, they were starting to appear. In their world mapping project, Malay peninsula, on the tip of which Singapore is located, along with other regions which had previously been under British influence, is all covered by brown dots, which denotes tweets written using American spelling, vocabulary and grammar. The current study, however, will focus only on American influences on phonological features of SgE, rather than written forms, including lexis.

### Causes of American Influence

The cause of American influences on SgE phonology has been debated for quite some time. Ohara (2005) contrasted the two differing views on the influence of conventional electronic media on linguistic innovation. She referred to the views of Trudgill (1974, cited in Ohara 2005) and Milroy & Milroy (1978, cited in Ohara 2005) that the influence of media on linguistic innovation is not as strong as that of social networks. However, Ohara argued that Singapore was physically small and did not have much geographical variation within itself, therefore the influence of the media could not be underestimated. On the other hand, Ohara also introduced the view of Gupta (1995) that the main cause of the entry of AmE phonology

into Singapore was the electronic media. Tan (2016; 2014) cited Poedjosoedarmo (2000) who pointed out the influence of media contents imported from the US. Aside from the influence of the electronic media, Ohara also pointed out American-trained Singaporean teachers as a possible factor which made AmE a less marked variety among Singaporean students.

In her study of Americanization of Hong Kong English (HKE), Hansen Edwards (2016) cited Rindal & Piercy's (2013, cited in Hansen Edwards 2016) study in Norway which concluded that Americanization of phonology was inescapable if the media contents to which learners were exposed were mainly of American origin. Edwards found that her subjects, who had access to such online media as YouTube, exhibited some features of AmE phonology even when they claimed that their preferred target model was BrE.

### Rhoticity

SgE has conventionally been described as a non-rhotic variety (Deterding, 2007; Low & Brown, 2005). However, since the early 1990s, more and more specialists have reported that some Singaporeans, especially younger ones, are starting to exhibit rhoticity in certain contexts (Gupta & Tan, 1992; Poedjosoedarmo, 2000; Tan, 2016; 2011). Non-rhotic accents are the ones in which the /r/ is pronounced only if it is followed by a vowel, such as in *run* /rʌn/, but not when it is at the end of a word as in *car* /kɑ:/, or before a consonant as in *cart* /kɑ:t/. RP, on which the target model in Singapore education system is based, is a non-rhotic accent (Deterding, 2007). On the other hand, in rhotic accents, the /r/ is always pronounced if it appears in the spelling, including in word-final positions and before a consonant, in other words, non-prevocalic positions (Roach, 2009). Therefore, in a rhotic accent, *car* would be pronounced /kɑr/ and *cart* /kɑrt/.

Previous studies discovered that Singaporeans considered pronouncing the non-prevocalic /r/ to be accurate, despite the fact that RP, the accent on which standard SgE is based, is non-rhotic. Among the 15 participants of Ohara's (2005) study, there was not a single person who never used a non-prevocalic /r/, even under very formal and artificial circumstances. She concluded that pronouncing of the rhotic /r/ was not considered incorrect or overly casual, although she could not determine if this was due to Americanization or substratum influence. The results of this study, then, will disclose how much, if any, the encroachment of AmE has advanced since Ohara's 2005 study.

Tan's (2012) study found that Singaporeans no longer considered the pronunciation of rhotic /r/ unusual or unnatural. She argued, based on this result, that it was unlikely that the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ was an influence from American media, because if it was a result of mimicking the American accents heard on TV and radio, it would have been considered pretentious and unnatural. These findings seem to corroborate the current study, which indicated that rhoticity signified accuracy, despite the fact that RP is a non-rhotic variety. In the current study, when the radio presenters intended an effect of likeness of American deejays, they even employed features of AmE phonology other than rhoticity which were not commonly heard among semi-rhotic Singaporeans, including unrounded open back

LOT vowel.

### Flapping of intervocalic-t

When a letter t is pronounced before an unstressed syllable, many speakers of American English pronounce it as a voiced sound which is close to a flapped /r/ sound of some languages (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2015; Roach, 2009; Trudgill & Hannah, 2017) This phenomenon is variously called flapping or tapping. This causes *latter* and *ladder* to sound identical in many forms of American English.

In the study Ohara (2005) conducted, very few of her Singaporean participants used the flapped-t sound. However, she cites an unspecified study conducted by a graduate student in Singapore who found that flapped-t was used extensively by age groups between 10 and 25 years old, while none of the older participants used it. If the date of this unspecified study was not far from Ohara's, it does correspond with my anecdotal observation that young adults of today's Singapore often use the flapped-t, which used to be unheard of in the past. A similar trend was also observed in Malaysian English (MalE), which shares many common features with SgE because of its historical and sociolinguistic background. Rajadurai (2006) found that Malaysian speakers were exhibiting the flapped-t in such words as *better* when modifying their speech in an attempt to make themselves more intelligible to their non-Malaysian interlocutors. Rajadurai attributed this to the influence of AmE. This may mean that, in the minds of those Malaysian speakers, AmE is more formal, accurate or even unmarked, despite the fact that MalE originally derived from BrE.

### Short o as unrounded open back vowel

While some past studies on SgE have focused on rhoticity and flapping, none, as far as I know, has been done on unrounding of open back vowel in LOT lexical set. However, this is one of the distinctive features of AmE phonology, and it is worth looking into if it is also making its way into SgE. Therefore, this is included in the features of AmE the current study will look into. In RP, a rounded vowel /ɒ/ is used for this lexical set, and most of the descriptions of SgE agree that an open mid back rounded vowel /ɔ/ is used for this class of words (Low, 2010).

According to Edwards (2016), rhoticity and flapping were commonly found Americanized features of Hong Kong English, another variety which has traditionally held BrE in prestige. However, use of /ɑ/ was rarely found in LOT words among Hong Kong English speakers in her study. A possible explanation for this phenomenon might be the cot-caught merger ongoing in the United States, especially in the western part of that country and among the youth (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017).

### American features used in different contexts

Studies have found that appearance of American phonological features among SgE speakers varied according to contexts. Ohara (2005) observed that while news programs

almost exclusively used BrE features, American ones were very commonly observed in entertainment programs. This shows that at the time of Ohara's study, RP-based pronunciation was still considered to be formal, and American features were reserved for more casual registers. However, this situation seems to have changed over time. By the time Tan (2012) conducted her study, rhoticity was found more frequently among those who had higher level education and socioeconomic background. This shows an important change in perception of rhoticity among Singaporeans: In the 2000s, American features such as rhoticity was considered fit only for informal situations, while by the early 2010s, they spread over even to formal registers. One of the focal points of this current study is to examine if this trend has continued to advance into the late 2010s.

## Methodology

I visited Singapore in February 2018 to record local radio programs. I used a portable medium-wavelength radio receiver and a high quality IC recorder to maximize the sound quality of recordings. I recorded a total of 14.5 hours of talk radio broadcasts including news programs and talk shows to cover both formal and informal registers as well as script-reading and spontaneous talking. For this purpose, I chose two local radio stations: 938Now (now renamed CNA938) operated by Mediacorp, public broadcaster; and Money FM 89.3 owned and run by Singapore Press Holdings. Those two stations were selected because they were the only English-language stations in talk radio format currently broadcasting in Singapore. Talk radio was chosen from different formats of radio stations because both scripted careful speech and spontaneous chats with guests and other personalities can be heard. The total number of program presenters studied is six. The presenters will be referred to in this study as follows:

- Middle-aged Eurasian male
- Younger Eurasian male
- Chinese male
- Eurasian female
- Chinese female
- Tagalog-speaking female

Due to lack of facilities and the sheer length of the recordings, auditory analysis was employed by the author, rather than an acoustic analysis. I marked down every time a rhotic renderings of words including post-vocalic /r/ was used by program hosts, announcers and guests, as well as instances of unrounded open back vowel in places where a rounded vowel should be used in RP. I paid special attention to whether the speaker was being consistent in uses of above features in order to determine if these have already become fixed features or a transition is still in progress. I also took note of the contexts in which these American features appeared. Presumably, news, public announcements and other script-reading occasions would call for formal registers, while spontaneous chatting with cohosts and guests might call for informal ones. Special attention was also paid to who the interlocutors were: In particular, if he or she was the presenter's fellow Singaporean or a foreigner; and if it indeed was a

foreigner, which country he or she was from. This is because I presumed that the Singaporean presenters should be more attentive to accuracy when pronouncing words to a foreigner. Although the Singaporean speakers included those with Chinese and Eurasian surnames, I did not take into account the ethnic backgrounds of the Singaporean speakers, because no significant differences in pronunciation were observed among different ethnic groups, at least among the program presenters. Due to time constraints and paucity of resources, my auditory analysis did not go through multiple iterations from different readers.

## Findings and Discussion

### Rhoticity

**Rhoticity as marker of accuracy.** An auditory analysis of the recordings showed signs that rhoticity seemed to denote accuracy in SgE. This implies that RP, which is consistently non-rhotic, is no longer considered the sole formal model in SgE. Below, I will give examples of, and comment on, the sequences in the recordings in which the speakers used rhotic pronunciations.

***When carefully reading scripts, including news reports and traffic updates.*** The following words were pronounced rhotically: *NR*, *better*, *service*, *Danker* (name of a personality), *R* (a letter of the alphabet, said in isolation), *year*, *hoarding*, *are*, *familiar*, *dinner*. It can be observed that word-final /r/ and r-colored schwa were most likely to be pronounced rhotically by semi-rhotic speakers, while NURSE vowel was rhotacized less often. In the above examples, only *service* had this r-colored vowel.

***When conversing spontaneously with inner-circle guests.*** The younger Eurasian male speaker was non-rhotic when casually chatting with local guests, but turned rhotic when interviewing a non-rhotic British and Australian guests. This is particularly notable in two respects. First, while this speaker showed "fraternity" with the local guests by conforming to the non-rhotic norm of mesolectal SgE, his choice of rhoticity or non-rhoticity in a given situation was not dependent on the variety used by his inner-circle interlocutor. Second, when it is presumed that one attempts to use a more accurate pronunciation when facing a non-local person, then his use of rhoticity in this situation proves that rhoticity is considered to signify accuracy.

***In all of the pre-recorded jingles and messages.*** Pre-recorded messages and Jingles were very likely to be fully rhotic: "It is Thursday, the fifteenth of February. Date check is brought to you by (company name); " "The budget 2018: What will the budget mean to you? Will there be any surprises, shocks or relieves? Join Michelle Kua from Business Times and our expert panel." Those recordings were done with a careful diction in a manner akin to that of professional voice-over artists. Again, it demonstrates that rhoticity is no longer considered to be a negatively marked variety but a sign of accuracy.

***Consistently rhotic speaker.*** There was only one female speaker who was consistently rhotic throughout, regardless of situations or interlocutors. She had a near General American (GA) accent. In an online post on a social networking site, she wrote that she grew up

surrounded by Filipinos, and that she enjoyed singing Tagalog songs and watching Tagalog films. (Mei, 2018) Filipinos are described as rhotic speakers, Philippine English being a rhotic variety deriving from AmE (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017). Therefore, this speaker's rhoticity may be a result of a Philippine influence.

**Rhoticity as "fake *angmo*" accent.** There were two speakers who used rhoticity in a peculiar way. They were semi-rhotic in formal situations like the ones listed above, but turned entirely rhotic when talking about pop music coming up in the programs. The middle-aged male Eurasian was sporadically rhotic when reading news, showing high rate of rhoticity especially in word endings. However, he turned thoroughly rhotic when introducing an upbeat pop tune, resembling the manner of deejays on hit chart format radio stations in Singapore. This can perhaps be called a "fake *angmo* (red hair, i.e. Caucasian)" accent, *angmo* being a SgE term meaning westerners in general, but here denoting inner-circle English speakers, especially Americans. While doing this, he even exhibited other features of AmE phonology not heard from other speakers sounding rhotic in formal situations, and not commonly heard among Singaporeans in general (Tan, 2016). These included:

- Flapped-t: *Twitter* /twɪt̬ɚ/
- Unrounded LOT vowel: *clock* /klɑk/, *got* /gɑt/
- Merging of nt: *interview* /ɪnɚvju:/; *twenty* /twɛni/

It is possible that this speaker is employing a marked "fake *angmo* accent" which is commonly heard in hit chart and adult contemporary format FM stations, as the above features were heard only when in reference to music played, and not in other situations, from the same speaker.

The female Eurasian speaker was also found to have turned entirely rhotic only when talking about pop music: "If there is anything we can learn from her music video, she wore very red lipsticks. That's good for Chinese New Year." This same speaker was totally non-rhotic when conversing with a guest who was a mesolectal variety of SgE within the same program: "Four years ago, right?"

**Non-rhoticity as marker of solidarity.** Another interesting phenomenon observed was that normally semi-rhotic speakers often turned entirely non-rhotic in the occasions when they chatted spontaneously with guests who had mesolectal SgE accents, perhaps wanting to project a more local and friendlier image. This phenomenon was also observed when the presenter was discussing familiar or local topics, such as food, health complaints, and so on. Here is an excerpt from an interview with a local university student, in which the speaker pronounced all of the underlined parts non-rhotically: "You know, you'll learn and they'll groom you into being somebody you didn't know you could be. So girls in general shouldn't think that engineering is just for boys. You could even be better than boys." As mentioned earlier, *better* was pronounced rhotically elsewhere. In a separate case, the mostly rhotic younger Eurasian male suddenly started sounding very mesolectal with total non-rhoticity when chatting spontaneously with local guests about Chinese New Year. These instances show that while rhoticity is considered more accurate and prestigious in line with GA, non-rhoticity can

be employed to emphasize solidarity and fraternity with the local "common folks".

**Non-rhoticity also still prestigious.** While there were signs that rhoticity was gradually becoming signifiers of accuracy and prestige, RP-like non-rhoticity was also found to have retained prestige in some situations. For instance, the Eurasian female presenter was sporadically rhotic in spontaneous speech, but turned entirely non-rhotic when carefully reading a news script. She even used British pronunciation of the word *schedule* /ʃɛdjuːl/, which might be considered marked in Singapore today under normal circumstances.

Another instance I observed was that of the Chinese male presenter, who is constantly non-rhotic, was often assigned to read scripted pieces, for example government public announcements. This presenter is also a host of more "up-market" programs, such as self-help interviews. This shows that, despite the fact that the prestige variety of SgE is gradually shifting toward GA-like rhoticity, in certain situations in which a very formal register is required, an RP-like non-rhoticity is still preferred.

### Open back vowel

Aside from rhoticity, another characteristic feature of GA is having an open back unrounded vowel /ɑ/ for LOT class words. However, this was rarely observed among Singapore radio presenters, even among those who are consistently rhotic. Instead, a rounded back vowel in vicinity of /ɒ/ and /ɔ/ is used for this class of words: *possible* /pɒsɪbl/. Even the female Tagalog-speaking presenter mentioned earlier who was constantly rhotic did have rounded /ɒ/ in words like *got* /gɒt/. The only exception to this rule was the middle-aged Eurasian male presenter, who turned to a "fake *angmo*" accent when introducing pop songs, as has already been discussed above.

There are two possible reasons for this phenomenon, in which different features of AmE phonology is accepted selectively. The first is that those speakers are still in a transitional stage of Americanizing their phonological system. The rounded back vowels /ɒ/ and /ɔ/ are both used in original RP-influenced acrolectal SgE (Low & Brown, 2005). Since rhoticity is a salient feature of GA which is increasingly considered to be the standard in recent years, those speakers are picking it up, although using open back unrounded vowel for LOT has not quite caught up yet. The second possibility is that those speakers are influenced by the users of north American accents that have gone through the cot-caught merger. In these accents, including those in the western parts of the US and most of Canada, the vowel in words like *cot* (/kɑt/ in GA) and *caught* (/kɔːt/ in GA) are pronounced with the same vowel, often as something akin to a slightly rounded back vowel /ɒ/ (Trudgill & Hannah, 2017).

## Conclusion

This study found that the ongoing Americanization of SgE was manifested among radio presenters in the following ways. First, they used rhoticity in contexts that required more accuracy and highly prestigious registers, indicating that rhoticity is no longer seen as a symbol of "sloppiness" that allowed "undesirable" American influences to seep in; conversely, it

is starting to be seen as more accurate and prestigious. At the same time, rhoticity continues to be associated with American pop culture as before. Mesolectal and basilectal SgE being entirely non-rhotic, the same semi-rhotic radio presenters turned entirely non-rhotic when expected to show solidarity with "ordinary folks". Thirdly, while Americanized features are gradually accepted as the norm in SgE, RP-like non-rhoticity still retains its prestige in very formal situations.

These findings are significant in the following ways in the field of Asian Englishes research. First, in spite of the predictions that outer-circle varieties of English would go through further diversification, it seems that SgE is going toward the direction of aligning more closely with an exterior standard, this time, GA (rather than RP). Indeed, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, Cambridge-educated founding father of modern Singapore, stated in 2013 to an astounded audience of Singaporean language-teaching professionals:

> I think the increasing dominance of the American media, means that, increasingly, our people, teachers, students and people generally, will be hearing the American version, whether potatoes or tomatoes. Therefore, sometimes I'm making a conscious switch on the computer between UK English and American English. And sooner or later, I'll move totally to American English because they will be the dominant force through sheer numbers and their dominance of economy. But for the reasons I have given, I believe we will be exposed more and more to American English, so we might as well accept that as our inevitable and final position to teach our students to recognize and even to speak American English (SPH Razor, 2013).

On the other hand, SgE developing variety within itself, in this case with a new variety which incorporates features of AmE, can also be seen as a sign of its maturity as a New English. In other words, SgE has entered "phase 5" of Schneider's (2007) dynamic model of postcolonial Englishes, which is the final stage of development of a New English in which internal variations start to appear. In the larger context of Asian Englishes, it remains to be seen if expanding-circle varieties that are based on the British model, such as Thai English and Cambodian English, are also in the process of being Americanized, phonologically as well as in other respects.

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